

## **ON TRACK WITH MDT**

With the recent anniversary of the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks, it is no wonder that the topics of public safety and homeland security have been cropping up in the media. One area that has received little coverage, however, is the recent development of an innovative security program entitled Highway Watch.

Earlier this year, the Montana Motor Carriers Association (MMCA), in partnership with the American Trucking Association (ATA), introduced Montana to the Highway Watch program. The program is premised on the fact that professional truck drivers know the roads well because they are out there seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, taking care of business. Thus, Highway Watch enlists the eyes and ears of specially trained professional truck drivers who watch for and report potential problems while traveling both Montana's – and the nation's – highways. When a Highway Watch driver sees something of concern, the driver phones in a report to the national Highway Watch Call Center. That report is then forwarded to the responsible state agency for appropriate action. Highway Watch is currently operational in twelve states, with Montana and Colorado being the first two participating western states.

To get the program up and running in Montana, Montana's commercial motor carrier industry is working with qualified drivers who have expressed interest in the program, and the Montana Highway Patrol is developing a comprehensive Highway Watch drivers' training program. The training is designed to help drivers correctly identify roadway problems and utilize standardized reporting procedures. In addition, it will help ensure that drivers and their employers understand and support the goals of the Highway Watch program, both nationally and in Montana.

Supporting the program includes understanding the risks the traveling public faces, with roadway problems historically falling into three categories: 1) accidents and roadside emergencies, 2) road maintenance issues, and 3) commercial vehicle size or weight problems. Because Highway Watch cannot guarantee a quick response for accidents or other bona fide highway emergencies, Highway Watch drivers are being trained to report such emergencies by calling 9-1-1 or by contacting the appropriate law enforcement authority.

Road maintenance, on the other hand, is a much broader category that requires the Highway Watch driver to make an appropriate judgment call. Specifically, this category refers to traffic impediments in the driving lane, including large dead animals (deer, elk, moose, bear), large rocks, tree limbs and so forth; to dangerous after-hours weather conditions (i.e., snow or ice) that render travel unsafe; and to damaged highway infrastructure, including bridges, signs, delineators, guardrail and railroad crossing arms. Notifying the Highway Watch Call Center of such issues ensures that these maintenance problems will be reported to the appropriate MDT maintenance official for action.

The last category, commercial vehicle size/weight problems, includes incidents such as a truck traveling illegally on a restricted route, an oversized load traveling after dark or during the weekend, or an oversized load traveling without the proper signing, pilot car or lights. Highway Watch reports involving these types of problems will be routed to MDT's Motor Carrier Services Division for action.

So what does all of this have to do with homeland security? After September 11, 2001, a new Highway Watch reporting category suddenly became very important, and this is where the innovative nature of the program shines through. If the United States experiences another internal terrorist attack, many experts believe that the method of delivery may well be a commercial vehicle. The beauty of the Highway Watch program in this post-September 11 world is that, through the Highway Watch Call Center, participating truck drivers can instantaneously report suspicious activity they see or overhear while traveling the nation's highways. Reports of this nature will immediately be referred to the appropriate homeland defense agency for investigation. Enlisting the grass roots support of the trucking industry in the war on terrorism is a stroke of genius, and I commend the Montana Motor Carriers Association for institutionalizing the Highway Watch program in Montana. By working together, Montana can stay "on track" with both the state's and the nation's security concerns.

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